



Groove Rider

MATT FROST TALKS TO COMPOSER, PERFORMER AND ACOUSTIC INNOVATOR PRESTON REED ABOUT HIS UNIQUE APPROACH TO THE INSTRUMENT

While most great guitarists would be grateful to leave behind a legacy of classic recordings, fine performances and blistering technique, US-born Preston Reed has gone a world further than that by essentially inventing an entirely new way of playing the guitar.

Although Reed, a resident of Scotland for the last eight years, does not enjoy the kind of status that his pioneering achievements so richly deserve, his influence is all too obvious on a brand-new generation of virtuoso guitarists such as Kaki King and Andy McKee, both of whom play in the style developed by Reed back in the mid-1980s.

TWO HANDS GOOD

Reed discovered that by using his left and right hands on the fretboard in an unconventional manner, he was able to use various parts of the body of the guitar to beat rhythms at the same time, leading to a leap forward in the sonic possibilities of the instrument. The style often fools people into thinking there are two or more guitarists at work, playing in tandem with some kind of percussionist.

"Often my left hand will be over the top of the neck and it tends to be playing hammer-ons and pull-offs on the bass strings," explains Reed. "Then my right hand has to be syncopating with that, either strumming or hammering on the notes on the neck or playing percussive things. I'm over the top of the neck with the left hand for two reasons: one is so I can play the bass strings, and two so that I can get over to the top to play percussively, which I do a lot of. There's just much more mobility if you're over the top."

If that simple summary of the style hasn't

left a few uninitiated readers scratching their heads a little, just wait until you hear the intense speed with which Mr Reed executes this technique: log on and have a listen to 'Shinkansen' on his MySpace page at www.myspace.com/prestonreed.

FATHER AND SON

Reed's first encounter with the guitar came when he was just eight years old. He remembers getting home from school one day to see his father teaching his sister Susan a few chords. At that point he didn't even know his Dad played, let alone owned a six-string, but it wasn't long before young Preston was angling for a few lessons himself.

"I wanted to get in on that so I asked him if he would show me some stuff," Reed says. "He said, 'Well, I'll get you a ukulele,' because that's what he'd learned on when he was a kid. So he got me a ukulele and I started playing that. But within a week I was sneaking into his closet and playing the guitar because I'd figured out how the ukulele worked. And as soon as I started playing guitar, it just felt right."

Seeing how keen the boy was, his parents bought him his own nylon-string guitar and unwisely enlisted the services of a classical guitar tutor. "My parents meant well," he says. "They basically saw how much I was playing so they got me a teacher. But he told me that everything I was doing was wrong – 'Don't do that! And don't do that!' – and he started having me read music and it just completely snuffed out my interest. Although I enjoyed the music that he was having me learn, it really was just about technique and reading and it just wasn't connecting with me. So I gave up on it after about six months."

PLAYIN' FAHEY

For the next seven years, Preston Reed's guitar gathered dust at the back of his closet until one fateful day some of his friends took him to see a gig by Jefferson Airplane country blues offshoot Hot Tuna. While this served to re-ignite his passion for music and, more specifically, for the guitar, another important influence came by way of a boyfriend of Reed's sister Frances.

"Frances was dating a guy who was very into John Fahey. He had a Martin and was learning how to finger-pick and all of a sudden that really grabbed my attention – that plus having heard Hot Tuna play. I just launched into it again."

The playing of John Fahey, and later Leo Kottke, would have a profound influence on Reed, essentially laying the foundations for the highly percussive playing style that would develop later.

"John Fahey's playing is very simple but also very expressive," explains Reed. "If you want to learn alternating bass finger-picking, I would say he's the best to learn from because he plays very slowly and you can hear everything he's doing. I was already playing the tunes from an acoustic Hot Tuna album, but John Fahey was a revelation – that concept of having the thumb doing one thing, as an

independent voice, and the fingers syncopating against it.

"I later took that idea and changed it into one hand doing one line and the other hand doing a different line, having them syncopate with each other – this very pianistic thing I do. I learnt it from the multi-voicing that's happening with alternating bass finger-picking."

CHANGING HANDS

By the mid-'80s Reed had established himself as both an acoustic instrumental virtuoso and a popular live performer, but his heart and soul seemed to be striving for something more. "I was 32 and I'd already made five records of finger-picking," he recalls. "I was at a sort of plateau. I loved writing music and I loved finger-picking, but I just wanted to do something much scarier, much more ambitious."

It was at this point, around 1987, that Reed happened upon the style for which he's now widely known. "It was initially an experiment but it worked great so I just kept going, just kept writing more and more tunes that way and audiences really enjoyed it. So there was no reason not to continue with it."

Like any guitarist who begins 'changing hands' in an attempt to play in the Preston Reed style today, Reed found it pretty uncomfortable when he began

STANDING OVATION

PRESTON'S GEAR: REED ALL ABOUT IT

Preston Reed's main guitar is a heavily customised Ovation **Adamas Longneck electro-acoustic**.

This guitar has an unusually long 720mm scale length (28.33 inches), providing increased string tension and making unusual lowered tunings possible. To counteract the extra weight of the long neck, a counterweight at the end pin has been added, while the guitar's bowl back is made from fibreglass rather than Ovation's usual composite material, giving a more snappy response. Combined with a very thin carbon-graphite top, this instrument gives Reed the extra low end definition and percussive resonance he needs. A dual pickup system has been fitted, adapted from Ovation's OptiMax blender system.

However, Reed is keen to point out that the instrument is of only secondary importance when it comes to playing 'the Preston Reed way'. "I initially developed this style on the acoustic guitar that I was playing at the time," he explains. "These days I've got a one-of-a-kind, custom-made Ovation but I think a lot of players have made the mistake of thinking, 'Right, I'm gonna go get an Ovation because that's what he plays – that's the secret to what he's doing!'



And it's absolutely not. The Ovation came along well after I was into this style. If you check out my instructional video *The Guitar of Preston Reed: Expanding The Realm Of Acoustic Playing*, that was actually done on a Washburn acoustic guitar. I just want to make sure everyone knows that it's not really about the guitar!"

As well as the Ovation pictured above, Reed is currently using four other guitars live: the 1970s Yamaha AE2000 jazzbox used to record *Spirit* (also pictured above), a Washburn 12-string dreadnought acoustic, a Yamaha baritone electric and an Amistar Style 'O' resonator with a P-90 pickup. For amplification, Reed uses a Schertler Unico acoustic combo and, on occasion, a pair of Boss stompboxes – an RV-5 Digital Reverb and a CE-5 Chorus Ensemble.



doing it. "Initially it felt strange, and any guitarist who's taken a workshop from me finds it really exhausting to have your hand over the top of the neck. But they get used to it. In the same way that when you're under the neck you're sort of holding on to it, when you're over the top you can actually rest your hand on it. I rest my hand like that on the neck. It gets a lot easier the more you do it."

Reed has always actively encouraged other guitarists to experiment with his style and technique, whether in face-to-face workshops or through his series of instructional DVDs. But one thing that irks him a little is when people ape his style yet don't give credit where credit is so obviously due.

"I'm flattered that what I'm doing is really catching on now and that there's a lot of young players that are very excited about it," he says. "But, you know, there are some who are not really acknowledging where they're getting it from, and that's a little bit of a problem. But in the long run I don't think it'll be that way. What I'm hearing more now than I was a couple of years ago is people admitting where they got it. The ones that aren't are actually making themselves look bad! But my point isn't to hold onto this and charge royalties or anything like that. I have always freely taught my techniques and I've always said, 'Go and make your own music, don't make my music, make your own!' And I'm happy that's happening with a lot of players now."

ON THE GROOVE

Reed's instrumental compositions are not only highly complex and technically astounding, they're also resoundingly emotive and manage to tell a story through the images they evoke. The original creative spark that kicks off a particular piece can come from all sorts of places.

"Each tune is different," explains Reed. "Each one has a little window that you enter it through. With some tunes, the window's a groove or a bass line or some kind of cycling groove thing. For others it can be a harmonic progression that's really pretty and then you have to flesh it out with a melody and then put that to a rhythm.

"Music is composed of these different parts – the rhythm, the harmonic progression and the



■ One-of-a-kind: Reed with his Amistar electric resonator



melody – and then the story-telling thing. It almost doesn't matter what order you do it in, as long as you're covering all those bases. For the stuff that I'm best known for, the way in is usually through rhythm and groove. I've found that the guitar playing just sort of happens after the groove."

Changing tuning can also be an important catalyst to the writing of new material. "A new tuning is another window into something creative and that can certainly get things started in a very exciting way," says Reed. "Like just changing one string, putting it into a different place. I've found this often happens: I'll be in a certain tuning that I'm

"I'M PART OF THE HISTORY OF THE GUITAR NOW"



■ Reed's live rig: Schertler Unico acoustic combo and Boss RV-5 Digital Reverb and CE-5 Chorus Ensemble effects

comfortable with but I'm starting to get bored with, and I'll just change one string. There'll be enough there that I know, from being familiar with the tuning, yet the new string creates all these new issues – and you can end up getting a goldmine of new music out of that."

One of the tunings most commonly used by Reed is CGDGGD, together with a few slight variations based around it. However, his last album *Spirit* – essentially a solo jazz guitar record – uses standard tuning. The inspiration for these compositions was different again: a Yamaha AE2000 archtop electric that was lent, and later given, to him by a friend. "Getting a new instrument can completely start a new creative stream. That's always happened with me, actually."

MAKING HISTORY

Our final question, before leaving Preston Reed in peace for the few hours left before the night's gig at Norwich's Arts Centre, is how he would like to be remembered. It doesn't take him long to come up with an answer.

"As someone who, as an artist, trusted himself to hear the music and make the guitar play the music," he says. "It's not that I'm against conventional guitar playing, it's just that I wanted more. I wanted more than what I was playing. I wanted more than what I heard. I really saw the potential of making the guitar become a different instrument, and the clue to that was in its percussive qualities. I'm part of the history of the guitar now... and I'd like to be thought of as an important part of the history of the guitar." **GB**